

Stories of Recovery in LA County:

John Czernek

My name is John Czernek and I have a story to tell. I was born in Downey, California, and moved to Chicago when I was five-years old. I'm the oldest of three children and think of my younger brother Stanley as my twin, just born two-years later.

My father was an alcoholic and my mother was very protective. Growing up in a Chicago suburb with two working parents, I had a lot of freedom. My father worked during the day and my mother worked graveyard. They did their best to provide for us and we worked for what we had. I had always been intrigued with how things worked and learned how to sew, do laundry, cook, clean, fix things around the house, and work on cars.

By the age of 11 or 12, I started smoking weed. My parents knew what I was doing, but maybe thought it was alright to do. When I smoked weed everything was better: the grass was greener, the sky was bluer, and my thoughts were much clearer. When I was 13, I learned how to drive so I could take us home from family gatherings or bars when my father was drunk and my mother was at work. When I was 15, my brother and I got into some trouble. Like I said—we were just like twins and did everything together. By the time I was 17, things were looking great. I worked two jobs, got good grades in school, played hockey, and was planning a summer trip to France with my senior French class.

Midway through my senior year, my mother decided to move the family back to California. I begged and pleaded with my mother to stay but the answer was NO! I left all my friends, my plans, my 1966 SS Cutlass Convertible, and my hockey stuff (no ice in California). But I went to college. Then, I fell in love and dropped out of college. I moved out of my parent's house, married, and started wrenching on everything from bicycles and lawn mowers to houses and tractors. I worked at an equipment dealership for 11 years and then started my own business. I had two kids and bought a house—all the while smoking weed.

I made a lot of money and did as much as I could. But one day, I woke up and didn't care about anything anymore. I wanted to sleep forever and was angry every time I woke up. I spent a year sleeping on the couch and lost everything, not even caring if there was food in the house for the kids. Suicide was not an option—my brother took that way out when he was 26. I knew what the aftermath did to the family and I couldn't put them through that again. I knew how to fix a lot of things and how to help other people, but I didn't know how to help or fix myself. I was sleeping 18-20 hours a day, weighed 440 pounds, and couldn't stand up long enough to take a shower.

During an emergency room visit, I was given a referral for mental health treatment. I found the Rio Hondo Mental Health Clinic (RHHM) and met someone who understood and was willing to help me and my family. That day was the beginning of a new life. I tried a lot of different medications, but found the right ones.

After a few years at RHHM, a co-occurring disorders (COD) program started and I made the commitment to attend the program three days a week. Little did I realize, the people in this group saved my life and gave me a second chance. I would sit quietly in groups and listen to others share. It was amazing how we all related to each other. Instead of working on tractors, I worked on origami, did puzzles for hours on end, and wrote poetry. RHHM gave me a safe place to stay from morning until night. They taught me life skills, coping skills, and how to live sober with a mental illness. They also looked at my physical health and referred me to get a physical. Oh boy! I sick with high blood pressure and cholesterol, had diabetes and sleep apnea, and was morbidly obese.

Then came a turning point in my recovery that I will never forget. My mother, the queen of my family, wanted to talk with my treatment team at RHHM. She used to tell me, “Those people over there are keeping you sick so they can make money off of you. I want to talk to them and tell them what I think.” Whatever mom says goes. I set up a meeting with my therapist, doctor, case manager, and peer advocate. The day of the appointment came and I was a wreck. Here I was, doing so much better, and my mother was coming to do something that I would probably resent her for doing. I wanted to leave so badly, but my team said I had to stay. They started the meeting by laying out manuals, books, pictures, and articles about me and my condition. They explained to her exactly what was going on with me, and answered all of her questions. My mother looked at me and then back at them and asked, “So if we would have known this 11 years ago, my son Stanley would still be alive?” They said, “Yes.” That was all it took. My mother was now behind me 100%. She understood what I was going through and that I was getting better.

I graduated the COD Program at RHHM. I then went to a training through the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH) with Dr. Bradley and Dr. Whiten. There I learned how to be a co-occurring peer advocate specialist and received my certificate. With that certificate, I was able to apply for a job with DMH. I completed my internship at Long Beach Mental Health (LBMH). I was the first peer advocate at LBMH and no one was sure what my role was. I felt like a lost puppy dog but started by introducing myself to everyone I could and learning names. Little by little, I found my place at the clinic and fell in love with them. It felt like I had worked there for a long time and fit in like the last piece of a puzzle.

At LBMH, I am involved in as many things as I can possible do. I run groups and co-facilitate whenever I am needed. I listen to clients and disclose whenever it is helpful. I take clients to meetings, groups, conferences, SAAC, and Client Coalition. I assist clients in obtaining benefits and disabled bus passes. I sit in on case presentations and staff welcomes my feedback on COD issues. Clinic staff encourage me to go back to school and get more education. I work with are wonderful people and I couldn’t ask for a better place to work. A serendipity effect happens when I come to work and helps me to motivate clients to change themselves for the better. There are a lot of clients here at LBMH and only one me. I see such a need for more peer advocates here at this clinic and throughout DMH.

I am still in recovery and will probably be for the rest of my life. I have been given a second change at a new life--one filled with love, compassion, honesty, spirituality, hope, and being humble. Life is not wrapped with a bow, but it's still a gift. Cherish it! JCZDMHCOB 2009